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Taboo and Morality.—By PROFESSOR CRAWFORD H. TOY, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

TABOO differs from other early institutions of society in that it relates largely to everyday conduct. It is obvious that a universally accepted system of prohibitions in a community must have some effect on men's idea of what constitutes right and wrong, and that a widespread institution must be intimately connected with the history of civilization. What is the relation between taboo and civilization, and especially between taboo and morality? Mr. Frazer, in his article "Taboo" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, holds that taboo "subverted the progress of civilisation by fostering conceptions of the rights of property and the sanctity of the marriage-tie." He adds, "We shall scarcely err in believing that even in advanced societies the moral sentiments, in so far as they are merely sentiments, and are not based on an induction from experience, derive much of their force from an original system of taboo." Mr. Jevons, in his interesting *Introduction to the History of Religions*, accepts Mr. Frazer's statement, and goes farther. "The imperative of taboo," he says, "is categorical, not hypothetical." "The sentiment, merely as a sentiment and apart from the reason or justification of it, is the same in all cases, namely, that the thing must not be done." "The essence of taboo is that it is *à priori*, that without consulting experience it pronounces certain things to be dangerous. These things, as a matter of fact, were in a sense not dangerous, and the belief in their danger was irrational. Yet, had not that belief existed, there would be now no morality, and consequently no civilisation." "This belief was a fallacy . . . but this fallacy was the sheath which enclosed and protected a conception that was to blossom and bear a priceless fruit—the conception of Social Obligation. To respect taboo was a duty towards society, because the man who broke it caught the taboo contagion, and transmitted it to everyone and everything that he came in contact with."

It thus appears that, of the two sides of moral life—the sentiment of obligation, and the determination of what is right and what is wrong—the former is regarded by Mr. Jevons as owing its effective existence to the institution of taboo. He does not

say in so many words that the sentiment of obligation was created by taboo (which he regards as irrational and non-moral), but he declares that it lived and grew only by reason of the protection which taboo afforded, that without taboo there would now be no morality.

Now it is true in one sense that in a line of advance every antecedent is a necessary condition of its consequents. But it does not follow that for a given antecedent some other might not have been substituted. Or, rather, as it is more accurate to say, in a complex antecedent, it is necessary to determine what is the active element of advance, and what is the merely formal and accessory condition. We must, therefore, ask to which of these categories taboo belongs, or whether it partakes of the nature of both.

The question of the universality of taboo need not detain us. In the nature of the case its universality cannot be absolutely proved ; but it is now found among uncivilized peoples in all the great divisions of the world, traces of it are discoverable in the great ancient religions and in modern civilized communities, and for our purposes it may be assumed to have belonged to all early stages of social organization. Nor is its transmissibility a point of moment for an inquiry into its moral influence. This character seems not to be hard to understand from the point of view of the early man, and it no doubt contributed powerfully to maintain the influence of the institution ; but it does not affect the fundamental question of the relation between taboo and morality. It is simply one feature of the custom, depending for its effect on the social instinct and on social organization.

It may be assumed that the sentiment of obligation preceded the institution of taboo. The latter can hardly be said to belong to the earliest stage of the life of men. It supposes not only that men have come into conscious relations with the Unseen Powers, but also that special relations have been instituted between these Powers and certain objects and acts—it supposes, in a word, an organization of religion, and a relatively advanced organization. But there is reason to believe that the germ of the moral sentiment existed in the prehuman period, and that man, at the moment when he became man, was already potentially a moral being. He was doubtless also at the same moment potentially a religious being, and the two attitudes or qualities were elevated into independent and recognizable form by the same general fact, that is, by his experience of life. Without undertaking a dis-

cussion of this point, it may be said that man's contact with his fellows, with the animal and vegetable world, and with the powers of nature, forced on him, or developed in him, the sentiments of dependence and deference. These sentiments in their manward activity, aided by the instinct of sympathy, produced morality, and in their godward activity produced religion. It may in like manner be assumed that a certain social organization was coeval with the life of man as man, and preceded the institution of taboo.

In our own life we know of nothing except social intercourse that directly affects either the moral sentiment or the moral code. This intercourse may be with men or with gods. This latter side has become in modern times simply an aspiration ; in the earliest human stage with which we are acquainted it is an objective fact—the powerful god and the powerful man are feared, propitiated, and obeyed in very much the same way. There are duties toward the gods and duties toward men, and both go back to the initial sentiment of dependence. Taboo deals with the first class of duties, ordinary morality with the second.

Duty toward man (if we leave out of view such instincts as sympathy and maternal love) is defined by the necessities of social relations. *That* we are to defer to our fellow man, and *how far* we are to defer to him, are things taught us by experience. Early man's code of natural individual rights contained only two particulars : the right of life (including happiness), and the right of property, and these were founded partly on the perception by each man of his own rights, and partly on the conviction that his rights could be secured only by recognizing the rights of others. Hence, for example, the rules "thou shalt not kill," "thou shalt not steal," "thou shalt not take thy neighbor's wife." All such rules regard man's relations with man, and of necessity take form whenever men undertake to live together as friends.

Duty toward a god is, in like manner, in early life defined by social relations with the god. It becomes known, for example, that he dwells in a certain animal or tree or grove or stone, and man's common sense teaches him that he must be cautious in his dealings with these objects. If a hut is built for the god or for the object in which he dwells, and a man is selected to guard it, then the hut and man are to be respected as the god is respected. If a chief is known to be a god, his person and his property are of course sacred. If the god chooses to manifest himself in sickness, in death, in birth, objects connected with these facts are to

be treated as the god is treated, not to be lightly touched, but to be left in the god's possession. All such rules spring from duty to the god, who is known, no matter how, to assert possession of certain things.

Here, then, are two systems of regulations which arise in different ways, and may easily come into collision one with the other : the sentiment of pity for the sick, for instance, may clash with the taboo which forbids one to touch the sick. In such cases the sentiment which is the stronger at the moment will prevail. Greed or fear may override the recognition of property-rights : a chief touches a boat with his hand or his spear and declares it to be his, and the owner submits ; the chief simply uses his power to steal, and the victim is afraid to resist—this is not a strange procedure even in our day.

Sometimes the two sets of principles coalesce : taboo apparently entered the region of purely human relations. A man might declare his land taboo, and thus save it from depredation ; a married woman was taboo to all men but her husband. This is in accordance with religious history everywhere : religion always appropriates and supports the moral rules which spring from the ordinary social relations. In the cases mentioned above the right of property in land and wife was not created or suggested by taboo ; men avail themselves of a current religious belief in order to enforce an existing right. In like manner ancient religious asylums represented regard for human life, which was originally the product of a purely human instinct—there is no proof that the early man respected his fellow as a child of a god, and therefore entitled to the same regard which was paid to the god. But the religious taboo obviously reinforced the non-religious sentiment of right.

Taboo was in its essence non-moral. In its practical working it was often anti-moral, since it elevated to the rank of duties actions which not only had no basis in human relations, but were antagonistic to the natural healthy human instinct of right. Hence ensued a conflict between it and morality—a conflict which has lasted to the present day, and has formed a large part of the ethical history of the race. Of the issue of such a conflict there could be no doubt, since of the parties to it one is rational and the other irrational. But here by some writers a grave difficulty has been supposed to exist. Taboo, it is said, is irrational, it does not depend on experience, and cannot be tested by experience—there are stories of men who have died of fright on finding out

that they have violated some absurd rule ; thus, it is said, early man is enclosed in a vicious circle from which there seems to be no escape. As to this, it is to be remarked that the assertion that taboo is independent of experience is without foundation. On the contrary, all the evidence points to the fact that it is the product of experience. But, leaving this point aside, there is no more difficulty in this problem than in all the other problems of human progress. If certain religious authorities declared that kings were divine, that women were an inferior order of creatures, that the sun went round the earth, how did men ever come to think otherwise ? How but by that progress of thought which belongs in some degree to all communities of men ? Human societies, it is true, differ greatly in their power of observation and thought. There are some that have never got beyond believing that the earth is flat, and in such as these taboo still reigns. But the peoples of progress have thrown off taboo as they have thrown off a hundred like things. Mr. Jevons, however, has another explanation of the rationalization of taboo. "Wherever," he says, "the operation of taboo is accepted as an ultimate fact which requires no explanation, there no advance towards its rationalization can be made, and progress is impossible. But as soon as a taboo is taken up into religion its character is changed ; it is no longer an arbitrary fact, it becomes the command of a divine being, who has reasons for requiring obedience to his ordinances." Thus, according to Mr. Jevons, it is religion that has brought taboo into the domain of reason, and made its rationalization possible. The taboos not adopted by religion, he goes on to say, are neglected by the community, and thus the irrational restrictions are gradually dropped. I say nothing here of the expression "taken up into religion," because it connects itself with Mr. Jevons' view of the origin of taboo, which I cannot here discuss ; in point of fact, we know of no taboos which were not in some way connected with religion. Leaving this question aside, Mr. Jevons' statement of the effect of religion on taboo seems to me to be the precise opposite of the fact. The term "religion" is, of course, here used in the sense not of the simple sentiment, but of a body of thought regulated by an authoritative body of men. In this sense religion has, as a rule, been the guardian of taboo, and has modified its material of taboo only as this material has been modified by the general opinion of the community. A better statement of the fact would be that the religious sentiment, under the guidance of enlightened thought,

has been constantly occupied with setting aside the irrational restrictions which were imposed on men by earlier unenlightened thought. The old requirement that the worshipper should change his clothing on entering a sacred place has been set aside simply by a broader view of the nature of worship. Instead of saying that religion by adopting certain taboos has suppressed others, it would be better to say that religion has from time to time dropped those taboos which the community would no longer tolerate. A striking illustration of this principle is afforded by the history of the abolition of taboo in Hawaii eighty years ago. Before missionaries had visited the islands, or any attempt at reform had been made from without, certain members of the royal family, having made up their minds that the institution was intolerable, publicly violated its rules. Thereupon the whole structure fell with a crash. The people, with few exceptions, welcomed the release from a painful burden. The priests had not been consulted, but threw themselves heartily into the movement. The leader in the reform was a woman; taboo pressed most heavily on women. The source of the revolution was the natural human revolt against an evil which observation showed to be unsupported by real authority. The people had seen Europeans living unharmed amid constant violations of taboo.

It has here been assumed that taboo is essentially religious; but it will amount to the same thing, for the point under discussion, if we admit that, wherever we can with some distinctness trace it to a beginning, we find it connected with religion.

If the positions taken above are correct, it follows that taboo has been not the creator of the moral sentiment or the moral code, but a concomitant of man's moral life which has sometimes opposed, sometimes coalesced with natural morality. Like all widely-extending institutions it has tended in part to weld men together, like all irrational restrictions, it has tended in part to hold men apart; like all positive law it has fostered the sense of obligation, like all arbitrary law it has damped the power of intelligent and moral obedience. It was not the guardian of morality, but a temporary form in which a part of the moral law expressed itself. The real moral force of society was sympathetic social intercourse, which under the guidance of an implicit moral ideal, was constantly employed in trying to rationalize or to reject those enactments of taboo which were proved by experience, observation, and reflection to be irrational.